THE AMERICAN BOOK CLUB: BOOK CLUBS AS COUNTERSPACES

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ABSTRACT

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Book clubs have long been spaces for people to explore ideas, theories, and literature, particularly at times when many groups were barred from formal higher education. Throughout American history, many of these groups, have utilized book clubs to find community and educational enrichment. In early America, reading groups offered a space to explore topics that would not otherwise be discussed, such as Anne Hutchinson's bible study. Hutchinson's bible study allowed for women in the colony to explore religious ideologies and belief systems, which they would not have been able to do in the traditional Church. Later, women's reading groups exploded nationwide in the post-Civil War years as women sought access to knowledge and the status it provided, and it is these groups that laid the groundwork for the later women's rights movement of the early 1900s by equipping women with tools for widespread organizing, such as management skills, public speaking, financial awareness, and other important skills. Other demographics have also formed book clubs as a way to enrich their lives and create safe spaces, such as Black Americans, who in the post-Civil War reading group boom and beyond were typically denied access to not only formal higher education, but also the reading groups lead by

white people. In the present, book clubs continue to be popular amongst across demographics and serve as alternative spaces to formal educational settings. Furthermore, book clubs act as a communal space to explore relevant issues, and many book clubs exist for specific marginalized demographics, allowing these groups to create spaces outside of the mainstream, and often predominantly white, culture.

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INTRODUCTION

From their inception in the United States, book clubs, and the varying iterations of this type of group, have intimately linked together peoples excluded from mainstream American culture, politics, and formal educational settings. Historically, these social and literary groups served as meeting places for marginalized peoples to access resources typically reserved for people receiving advanced education or those accepted by conventional American society. These meeting groups also functioned as spaces for community-building and organizing, as well as venues in which non-mainstream ideologies could be circulated and explored. (To clarify, advanced education can hold different meanings in different contexts — for the purpose of this work, advanced education, unless otherwise specified, refers specifically to postsecondary education.) The varying functions of the book club throughout American history serve to create counterspaces, which are defined by scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks as "non oppressive 'spaces'" for "racial and/or sexual minority individuals [to create and participate in] as a form of adaptive responding" (Hunter).

These persistent gaps indicate that advanced education remains difficult to attain for marginalized peoples in the United States. It's from within these gaps that alternative forms of education have historically emerged such as book clubs. Book clubs, interestingly, appeal to both those who have higher education and those who do not. They provide spaces for groups to explore literature and critical thinking outside the confines of traditional academic study. By removing the constraints of the formal educational setting, book clubs act as a counter-space for groups that might otherwise be uncomfortable or unable to explore literary pursuits

1. BEGINNING OF AMERICAN LITERARY MEETING GROUPS

In Massachusetts during the 1630's, Anne Hutchinson founded a Bible scripture study group for women intended to supplement church sermons, and the group became the first known literary meeting group in what would become the American colonies. However, the group's rapid rise in popularity amongst men as well as women, and the large crowds that began gathering to listen to Hutchinson speak, aroused ministers' and other colony leaders' suspicions. Hutchinson expressed her theological beliefs and was accused of spreading antinomianism, a belief that asserts "[...] God's grace has freed the Christian from the need to observe established moral precepts" because believers have been pre-ordained (Anne Hutchinson | Beliefs, Significance, & Facts | Britannica). Hutchinson's teachings implied "that the saved had no need to obey local laws and religious codes", which "undermined the power of local officials" (NBC News).

Hutchinson, as her popularity rose, "charged that many of the Bay Colony's ministers were not among those chosen by God" (NBC News). Her words and actions became intolerable to the Puritan leaders of the colony and in 1638, "the ministers condemned her words as heresy and brought her to trial" (NBC News) At her trial, Governor John Winthrop accused Hutchinson of having "maintained a meeting and an assembly in your house that hath been condemned by the general assembly as a thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God nor fitting for your sex." ("Trial and Interrogation of Anne Hutchinson (1637)") Indeed, Hutchinson's sex played a large role in the criticism she received as her behavior and marriage disrupted the conventional gender hierarchy within the puritan colony; her husband was described by Govenor John Winthrop "as very mild tempered and wholly guided by his wife", which was surely meant to be

an attack on his masculinity as Anne challenged the idea that a woman's purpose was to submit to men, therefore undermining male superiority (NBC News). When the male authorities in the church deemed gatherings of women immoral, they inadvertently acknowledged the power of women's groups as centers for progressive thought and acquisition of knowledge. Ultimately, Anne Hutchinson was convicted of sedition and banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony to New York, where she was killed by Native Americans.

Hutchinson's scripture reading group was not a book club in the modern sense but it was a space for the women of the colony to meet and discuss not only the biblical texts and sermons accepted by the puritan Church, but also unconventional theological ideas. For those who disagreed with the Church's teachings or desired a space to explore non-traditional ideas, which they could not do in the Church without fear of reprisal, Anne Hutchinson's meeting group served as a counterspace to the mainstream culture of Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630's.

1.1 Post-Civil War White Women's Groups in the Nineteenth Century

Following the Civil War, several cultural shifts within the United States lead to the establishment of white women's clubs nationwide. Elizabeth Long argues that three factors are particularly important for understanding this trend; the growing importance of education to middle-class Americans, the war-time fostering of "self-reliance and tremendous organizational activity among women", and the elevation of "high culture [...] to almost transcendent status" (Long 336-337). In regards to the newfound cultural obsession with "high culture", "literary culture" was "an unquestioned symbol of distinction [that] could confer a transformative worthiness and cultural authority to the earnest women who made it their own" (Long 337). This unique cultural cache attached to literature, as well as the comparative accessibility of literature compared to other fine art forms, explains the rise of reading groups in the nineteenth century.

The challenges women's reading groups faced from men lead to the highly official, "parliamentary" structures often seen within them. There is evidence from these groups' early accounts that "male authority figures, from pastors to husbands, perceived these activities as a threat to domestic order" and made jokes at members' expense (Long 337). In the media, women's groups were satirized in cartoons and received male derision on a large and public scale. Despite these challenges, most women's groups took themselves very seriously and modeled their organizations to reflect this — "most groups had a constitution and bylaws in place after only a few meetings," dues, regulations, rules, and specific structures for meetings (Long 338). Long argues that "parliamentary procedure signaled the solemnity of these literary endeavors and separated their work from more informal women's social groups" and the use "the procedures that (voting) male citizens and legislators used [...] proclaimed legitimacy in the public sphere for these small groups of women [...]." (Long 338). From their inception, women's groups faced misogynistic criticism. In order to combat this, women used the procedures and practices of men's organizations to gain legitimacy in the male-dominated culture. These early reading clubs provided women with spaces to exist outside of the men in their lives, but even within these spaces they had to seek male approval and conform, at least somewhat, to a culture that marginalized them.

1.2 Black Women in Post Civil War Literary Society

Elizabeth McHenry, author of Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Reading Societies, describes "the tremendous thirst for education demonstrated by freed slaves in the years following the Civil War. [...] The freedpeople's desire for instruction was enormous, and they enthusiastically grasped opportunities to read and write openly and

legally." (McHenry 2). McHenry further explores the struggle of Northern Black people to exercise their literacy freely:

> "Despite their exclusion from institutions of higher learning and their limited access to literary works in the first decades of the nineteenth century, free Blacks in the urban North realized the urgency of creating their own opportunities to become readers and institute systems through which to exchange and produce literature." (McHenry 3)

McHenry illustrates the exclusion of Black people from advanced educational institutions as well as predominantly white informal educational settings, which at its core, was an effort to keep freedpeople out of public and private intellectual life in the United States. Without literacy, no group could hope to obtain political power, equal employment opportunities, or the full benefits of citizenship. Segregationist policies certainly drove Black people to form their own literary societies and spaces, but specifically when discussing the contrast between Black and white women's groups, the difference in goals were significant. White women's groups centered themselves within domestic ideology as they defended their groups, "claiming that intellectual growth would enhance their abilities as wives/mothers, while middle-class club women developed new literacy practices for their own purposes" whereas Black women, whose practices of sharing literature stretch back to the 1830's, utilized literary spaces to explore their identities within and at the intersection of both the Black and the female identity (Gere and Robbins).

1.3 The Woman's Meeting Club of Mattoon

One of the most prominent post Civil-War white women's clubs, The Woman's Meeting Club of Mattoon, was first called to order in 1877. The club has been meeting ever since, making them the longest-running women's club in Illinois. Similar to other clubs at the time, the club's

early notes “read like a graduate-level seminar [...]” as members discussed various intellectual topics. (Brotman) Anne Firor Scott, author of "Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History", asserts the women of the Mattoon club were “making up for the fact they couldn't go to college," (Brotman). Lynn Weiner, acting dean and professor of history at Roosevelt University, explains the academic nature of the club. "They were real study clubs," Weiner said. "These tended to be middle-class women; it was kind of a self-fulfillment movement [...] Someone would say, `I'm going to give a paper on Greek architecture.' Then she would formally present a paper, and everyone would sit around and ask questions." (Brotman) The club even went so far as to hire a professional critic to critique members’ presentations. From 1870-1880, the club’s members were voracious in their studies, hitting on subjects ranging from the Celtic origins of Portugal to Otto the Great, Charlemagne, Charles the Simple, Ignatius Loyola and the American Revolution.

The Mattoon Reading Club considers itself progressive and throughout its history, has taken progressive stances on various social matters. In 1879, club members wrote about the “dreadful doctrines” of Rhode Island’s founder, Roger William, with one member recording her thoughts “that the land belonged to the Indians, not to the King of England,"(Brotman). While this was not a current event, the members’ did voice anti-colonialist sentiment at a time when the majority of the American public remembered the time of American expansionism proudly and were unsympathetic to Native American’s issues — only three years prior, the U.S. Army had been swiftly defeated by Lakota Sioux and Cheyenne warrior The Battle of Little Bighorn. The groups’ expression of opinions contrary to the national mood indicates the Woman’s Meeting Club of Mattoon offered its members’ a space to educate themselves outside of the mainstream sources of the time period (Brotman). Indeed, the role of women’s reading clubs as centers for

progressive thoughts and movements would become more central in later decades — the Mattoon Reading Club demonstrates how these thought centers began. In 1920, the women voted to change their name from the Ladies Reading Club after deciding "ladies" was too old-fashioned — this event coinciding with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. In 1941, the women of the club studied the struggles of black Americans and women on welfare. The clubs' passion for education and self-improvement has not wavered throughout their long history. While the club no longer employs a professional critic and has lessened the emphasis on academic rigor, its members are still motivated to learn. Today, members still give presentations on books they've read and similar to their lecturing predecessors, prefer to learn about the real world and hence tend to read non-fiction — they feel this offers more to them intellectually.

To summarize, the historical evolution of literary groups in the United States is deeply intertwined with the history of women's lives. Anne Hutchinson used her group to express controversial theological beliefs, women after the Civil War utilized their clubs to attain education and skills otherwise denied to them on the basis of gender, and the thousands of clubs across the United States just like the Mattoon Reading Club were gaining the skills and knowledge that would later serve as the foundation for women's rights movements.

1.4 Women's Literary Groups as Collectives; Discrimination Within White Women's Literary Groups

It was not the academic subjects studied by early women's groups that most impacted women's lives during the 20th century; it was the practical skills of leadership, management, finance, organization, and public speaking that came from organizing and managing a large group of people. The Mattoon Reading Club is only one example of thousands of organization across the nation that had similar goals and offered similar intellectual opportunities to members.

Therefore, when women's suffrage became an increasingly important issue to American women, the vast network of localized women's groups were already prepared to organize. "In many ways, these older groups paved the way for women to view themselves as having a rightful place in intellectual culture. The seriousness of their work gave credence to women's participation in public intellectual life [...]" (Burger).

In their communities, women's clubs were forces to be reckoned with. When their attention turned to civic improvement, The Mattoon Club began a lending library before helping found the local public library. In 1886, the Club began a girls' sewing club and later organized the town's first Parent-Teacher Association (Brotman). They also helped found a hospital and passed an anti-spitting ordinance to clean up the streets of Mattoon. Nationwide, women's clubs were involved in similar civic projects or local politicking. These groups' organizing potential is demonstrated by civic projects that gave them the opportunity to learn fundraising, financial management, and other necessary skills to later help further the women's rights agenda.

The General Federation of Women's Clubs "became an important agent of Progressive Era reform, touching every point of the social order, where women felt they had particular concerns or special authority" (Seaholm 1934)(Skopcol 333). The Federation's work was extensive;

> "they established almost 75 percent of the public libraries in the nation, [...] began kindergartens, pushed for vocational education and other curricular reforms, supported higher education for women, [...] campaigned for universal compulsory education, [...] established juvenile courts and fought for protective labor legislation for women and children [...] they also pushed through pure food and water legislation and supported the

> conservation movement. Their accomplishments were remarkable, especially when one considers that they did not at that time have the right to vote." (Long 343)(Seaholm)

This group of women was made up of many local women's groups — these groups utilized their collective power to make great strides in education, justice reform, and environmental issues, laying the groundwork for later women's movements. Burger asserts:

> "the book club's confluence of the individual and collective-where the private act of reading meets the public act of discussion-echoes that rallying cry of second- wave feminism: "The personal is political." The desire to bring women together to better both themselves and their communities was the impetus behind the consciousness-raising ("CR") groups that were foundational to the women's movement of the 1960s and the '70s. Those smaller meetings more closely resemble today's book clubs than the women's clubs of the previous century." (Burger)

Black women faced exclusion from white women's literary groups during the post Civil War boom of women's clubs.

2. THE BOOK CLUB AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO PUBLIC EDUCATION IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Book clubs and other literary groups formed to spread ideologies that would not be taught in public or mainstream schools. Some examples of this include book clubs catering to non-mainstream social and political ideologies. *The United Autoworker*, a newspaper for automobile industry union workers, advertised its own book club for members in its December 1944 issue. W.M. H Levitt, International Education Director, emphasized the club was not only for adults, but for children as well, in his article *Reporting On Education*. Levitt wrote under the subheading *Books For All Family*:

> "The Book Club, [...] will contribute to the education of the entire family. Children, as they grow up, will then have the best books to read — they will not then be easily turned against labor. Too often, Union members' children are turned away from labor by the propaganda of the press and the reactionary teachings in the public schools. Through progressive literature in the libraries at home, we can counteract this harmful influence. In Detroit, for instance, which has a population almost entirely made up of CIO [(Congress of Industrial Organizations)] members, all high schools use a textbook in which it is brazenly stated that the CIO is an unAmerican organization. [...] We must see to it that our children receive a truthful and real picture of life as they grow old enough to take their places in society." (Levitt)

Levitt emphasizes that the intent of the Book Club's childrens' selections are to subvert the mainstream, anti-Labor education they receive in public schools and emphasize pro-Labor ideologies through literature. In this example, the structure of the book club operates as a counterspace to elementary and secondary public education by providing children with literature that exposes them to an ideology that would be unlikely to be taught within mainstream classrooms of 1944.

2.1 Data on Postsecondary Education for the Four Largest Ethnic Groups in the United States

Today, we see major shifts in higher education trends as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that "From 2000 to 2016, total college enrollment rates increased for White (from 39 to 42 percent), Black (from 31 to 36 percent), and Hispanic young adults (from 22 to 39 percent) but were not measurably different for the other racial/ethnic groups during this time period" (Snyder 8). Although rates of enrollment in postsecondary education have increased for students identifying as Black or Hispanic, persistent gaps continue to exist between these students and white and Asian students in advanced education (Shapiro et al., "Signature 12 Supplement: Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates by Race and Ethnicity – Fall 2010 Cohort"). According to National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC), there are significant differences in undergraduate degree completion between ethnic groups nationally; of those that enrolled in a postsecondary institution, 76.74 percent of Asian students, 72.06 percent of white students, 47.56 percent of Black students and 57.42 of Hispanic students completed degrees (Shapiro et al., *Completing College: A State-Level View of Student Completion Rates - Fall 2012 Cohort*). Despite major shifts towards improved rates of students of color enrolling in postsecondary institutions, the data shows that these

students are still underrepresented at graduation and are disadvantaged in comparison to their Asian and white peers. These statistics reveal that although the United States does not practice de jure segregation, the effects of discriminatory and exclusive policies continue to affect groups today.

2.2 The Modern Book Club as a Counterspace to Predominantly White Spaces

Today, book clubs that serve Black Americans remain popular as they provide a counterspace to predominantly white spaces, both within formal and informal settings. Within the African American community, book clubs have been a space for Black people to explore literature through a common cultural lens. It is critical to acknowledge that Black people have been excluded from predominantly white educational spaces, both formal and informal, including early white women's book clubs. Despite these barriers to access, Black people have created a vibrant literary community with prominent book clubs such as Well-Read Black Girl, Mocha Girls Book Club, and at least 755 other African American book clubs in the United States ("A List of African American Book Clubs in the United States Sorted by Name").

Black book clubs are intersectional spaces as they are often convergence points for varying identities. The term intersectionality was "was coined in 1989 by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics "intersect" with one another and overlap." (Coaston). Furthermore, these book clubs are often grassroots in nature, such as the Noname Book Club, which started with a Tweet from rap artist Noname and has grown into a club with over 132,000 followers on popular social media app, Instagram, and over 10,000 patrons on the pay-for-content platform, Patreon (Iman Stevenson). This book club is a casual space created within the Black community. Other clubs, like Well-Read Black Girl and Mocha Girls Book Club have retained some of the formality of initial literary societies that

maintained bylaws and kept rules; for instance, you must apply and be approved for a local branch of the national club if you'd like to begin a chapter.

Book clubs can also provide space for Black men to explore literature and literary topics in an environment that doesn't cater to whiteness. One such group is the Pittsburgh Cadres in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Cadres meet weekly on Wednesdays "to give black men a chance to read black literature and to facilitate discussions about relevant social issues" in an all-male environment (Houser). One member, called Glenn, said "We all come to the Cadre to learn from and teach each other," says Glenn. "Having elder brothers in the group allows us to learn from their experiences and allows for a myriad of generational views to be shared during the meeting. We discuss topics from a black, male perspective. Older brothers in the group can recommend literary classics that the younger brothers might not have considered. Our dialogue stems directly from the information we read in the books." (Houser) By creating a group specifically for Black men to meet and discuss issues they find relevant both within literature and their own lives, the Cadres have made a counterspace to both predominantly female and predominantly white spaces to allow open, constructive conversations between members.

3. OBSERVATIONS ON BOOK CLUBS

Educated women are also a large demographic of modern book clubs despite lacking the apparent need for a counterspace they can be in that's different from their predominant social surroundings. These book clubs fulfill the intellectual and social needs that many of the women, who don't work full-time jobs, likely desire. Marie Smith has been to law school, practiced law, and raised a family. Somewhere in all of that, she's also been a member of several book clubs. The first, a club in Atlanta, Georgia she joined when her daughter was a baby. She remembers the club in Atlanta was "a way for her to get out of the house" and meet with other women whose lives were similar to hers -- married, with a young child. She fondly remembers the club meetings, which occurred once a month and always at night. Marie admits that while she did read the books and enjoy them, the club was, for her and many others, a way to leave the husband and baby at home and focus on herself for a few hours. For a few hours every month, she left her responsibilities at home to enjoy the company of other women and share her thoughts.

When her husband's job required a relocation to Dallas, Marie found that she missed the book club's benefits. Particularly the social aspect. So when her friend from the local women's club called to beg her to come to her meeting at which only three women had shown up to, Marie went. She's stayed for 11 years. The women's book club now boasts over 15 regular members, most of which have been in the club for several years. The club's location moves monthly on a rotating basis of members' homes but the meeting time has not changed from Friday at 11 a.m. since its inception. The hostess prepares a meal, sometimes themed around the novel selected for that month. As with any well-run organization, there are rules. They include:

1. No books about World War II.
2. No books under 400 pages.
3. One cannot recommend a book if they have not personally read it.
4. Whoever chose the book leads that month's discussion.

Some, like Rule Number 1, were created from a specific incident; the women grew tired of books about World War II. The rules have helped keep the club alive for over a decade. Another contributing factor to the club's success, according to Marie, is the diversity of its membership. "I've met people from all over," Marie tells me excitedly, "Los Angeles, Pakistan, Poland." In fact, only one of the club's members is a born-and-raised Texan. The rest hail from various states and countries, including Germany and Poland. The two members from the latter two nations have had interesting discussions about the effects and history of the Holocaust as their experiences in two countries so close to it have shaped their views, which Marie found especially interesting to witness as it broaded her own. She explains, "You never know when a story will bring something up in someone's life."

While the club's members are diverse in background, they all share an important connection --gender. The viewpoints and experiences they bring to the club are all unique, but Marie believes that this common bond shapes the nature of their club. If men were allowed, the dynamic wouldn't be the same. "I don't think people would be as loose with things. I think it would change the perspective or the ability to just let loose," Marie says, "When you've been with this group of women for 11 years, there's nothing that isn't out there." This space is important to not only Marie, but each of the club's members, who have found a place where they can share their thoughts and lives with one another without facing scrutiny or judgement from men.

In contrast, there is another book club run by a fellow Preston Hollow Women's Club member that does include men. This book club is for couples. The wives are all members of the women's club. Claudia Jones founded this club when she, similarly to Marie, relocated to Dallas. from New Jersey for her husband's job in the 2010's and found that she missed the club she'd left behind.

The club began in 2012 and has been meeting regularly since. Logistically speaking, the club is a feat of organization. Finding space for seven couples is challenging, but also preparing a meal brings a new level of difficulty to hosting a meeting. Yet for the past 8 years they have always found a way. They meet on the third Wednesday of every month at a members' home and have dinner before diving into discussion. The dinner, Claudia believes, may be what has kept the club together all these years. Having dinner, she's found, relaxes people and opens them up before discussing the book. The current method of selection is actually the club's third. The host chooses three books, all of which must have a minimum 4 star-rating on Goodreads, and the rest of the club votes.

Claudia admits the club has an obvious social aspect but emphasizes literature as its primary focus. "The books are most important to me," she explains, "They always have been." The club's selections span many different genres, which Claudia attributes in large part to the presence of men in the group. "One of the benefits of doing a couple's book club is that some of the literature we choose are books I normally wouldn't gravitate towards," Jones elaborates, "We read a lot of nonfiction, and I've learned a lot that I otherwise wouldn't have." She points to the affinity for fiction over non-fiction she's witnessed in other, women-only book clubs as a key way the men shape the club. In this way, Jones feels that the men in the group are a positive contribution. Additionally, she finds "It's the men more than the women who are really good

moderators and who bring up points that make the discussion more interesting. Because it's a couples book club and you have the heterogender mix and it forces us to stay focused on the topic, and that's what makes a good discussion." However, Jones does note that the men's presence can have an adverse effect on the women. The men can dominate discussion. "The men can impede some of the women's ability to talk up," Jones explains. Her husband observed that generally the men moderate, not women. ¾ of the time if it's a couple who's hosting, it tends to be the men moderating. She compares this women's book clubs, "The women's group are more comfortable, are more relaxed, they don't feel like they have to perform. Maybe in a couples group you do and that's why some people are less likely to speak up. They feel they're going to be judged differently in a mixed group." Jones wonders if perhaps this dynamic would be different in a club of younger couples; the couples in her club range from 50-70 years old. Outside of discussion, the club's logistics are also affected by gender. Jones credits the women of the club for keeping it going as they're the ones who put in the work to host. "Most of the women in the group do not work or are retired or have part-time jobs," Jones explains, "The men for the most part are still working. They're not contributing to any of the set up or cooking." Again, she wonders if perhaps this can be attributed to generational norms.

Jones's book club is clearly successful. If the club's lifespan isn't proof of this, then perhaps the fact that it has a waitlist is. Much like Marie Smith's, the club has proved to be important and valuable to its members. Both clubs provide intellectual stimulation, exposure to new ideas, and social connections. Both women stated that they valued the literature brought into their lives by their clubs and that they were exposed to novels they otherwise wouldn't have chosen to read. Their clubs are different in several aspects, but their core missions are the same.

To discuss literature and explore relevant topics through the novels they read. However, it is important to examine how these clubs fit into the narrative surrounding book clubs today.

Both clubs are rooted in the Preston Hollow Women's Club, which is composed almost exclusively of upper-middle to upper class women in North Dallas. This is by design, as it is restricted by neighborhood. The accepted neighborhoods have a median home value of $1,008,480 and are primarily inhabited by college educated, white-collar workers (Preston Hollow Real Estate Market). Therefore, it can be inferred that the club is exclusive on the basis of socioeconomic class and would not be attainable for many.

This exclusivity is not restricted to the Preston Hollow Women's Club. Nationally and historically, book club members are typically older, college educated, upper-middle class white women (Burger). However, there are groups today challenging the status quo of books clubs. One such club is Well-Read Black Girls, a book club and literary festival exclusively for black women. The club strives "to showcase the universality of Black women through literature" and "provides a vital space for Black women readers and writers to connect and grow in conversation" (Well-Read Black Girl). Well-Read Black Girls is extremely popular, with over 237,000 Instagram followers. Through their dedication to creating a safe space for black women, Well-Read Black Girls is breaking down barriers and granting black women the same opportunity to explore social issues and discuss their own thoughts on literature without male or white judgement.

Research emphasizes the importance of Well-Read Black Girl and other clubs like it. In, I Feel Normal Here": The Social Functions of a Book Club in a Residential Program, the writers assert:

> "Book clubs are also potential spaces for participants to negotiate identity, language, social class, and gender. The collective conversation provides readers with an opportunity to come to richer understandings of a particular text. Especially for women who are marginalized and/or oppressed, book club conversations can create a space to relate to characters in books as well as to other participants." (McGillivray 4)

Book clubs function as safe spaces for their members, and clubs that have distinctive racial boundaries are no different.

A different study conducted on an inner-city middle school book club for eight girls of white, Latin, and African American descent "examined critical literacy and how texts, transactions, and talk enabled girls to examine their positions as readers and negotiate their identities in relation to novel characters and one another" (Smith 1). The study's preliminary findings "pointed to Book Club as a site where early adolescent girls were able to raise their own agenda and negotiate their issues and identities, within the multiple positions of race, age, and culture, when the variable of gender was removed" (Smith 1).

CONCLUSION

The creation of book clubs as countercultural spaces means groups that were previously underrepresented in both formal and informal educational settings, as well within cultural hierarchies, are now able to create spaces and control narratives in which community-specific ideas and issues can be addressed and shared experiences can be discussed, both in and out of the vehicle of literature. This is demonstrated by the mass founding of women's book clubs in post-Civil War America as well as by the groups founded by people of color who were denied access by both educational institutions and these predominantly white women's clubs. As the women's clubs sprang up to counter the male-dominated educational spaces, so other clubs were formed to counter these spaces. In this way, book clubs, by their nature, will continuously challenge the status quo, whether that be the status quo of formal educational environments or informal spaces, such as existing book clubs.

Book clubs have historically played an important role in American History as centers for progressive thoughts and movements, venues to challenge the status quo or question conventionality, and to build large grassroots networks up from small local groups. There's also a history of exclusion and racism that permeated white women's literary groups and lead to the creation of a vibrant literary culture within excluded communities, especially as the Black community created safe spaces to celebrate a shared history and experiences outside the scope of whiteness and predominantly white spaces.

Book clubs as counterspace provide groups with venues to explore the intersectionality of identity in a space that doesn't continue cycles of oppression or harm, but instead looks honestly

at those systems and the ways in which mainstream society is upholding them — and plants the beginning seeds of change, one book club at a time.

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